

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

31 Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." 33 He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 "Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." 52 And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Four comparisons of the kingdom

Mustard seed- starts small and grows beyond expectations

Yeast – causes something else to grow

Hidden treasure – worth investing in

Net – filled with both good and bad

To describe the kingdom of God, Jesus used things common to the lives of the people who were listening to him. They wanted to hear something new—too many in their time had made God's kingdom something difficult to experience. Access seemed limited to a few who knew the hidden things and did everything listed by those in the religious leadership. God's kingdom was mystery—it was hidden. Jesus gave a new definition of mystery—and connected the kingdom to something that was known.

There are advantages of having a kingdom that is exclusive. Not everyone can be part of it—especially those who are different from you. Often those are the people that we feel uncomfortable around. We might disagree with their politics, or their lifestyle, or how they look. And often those things make us think about ourselves. Maybe we're not always right, either.

Several years ago, I worked for Bishop Dave deFreese in the Nebraska Synod. Bishop deFreese used an image of the church that often made people think about this focused portion of God's kingdom. He said that the church was a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints. Hmmm. Something to think about.

When I drive to Dunlap or Moorhead, I often listen to audiobooks. I love to learn—and sometimes try to listen to someone whose opinions are very different from my own. That’s not always easy. This past week, I listened to “It’s Not About You” by Tom Rath. His grandfather was Don Clifton who was one of the people who started Selection Research in Lincoln, Nebraska. Selection Research grew to the point that they bought the more familiar Gallup Organization which is now headquartered in Omaha. I worked for Don Clifton in the early 1980s. And I knew Tom Rath when he was a little child. You might say that having worked for this family, I “knew how the sausage was made.” I saw the humanness of the leaders and the company they founded. I was a little skeptical as I listened to his book. And surprisingly, his book was insightful and helpful. Rath says that people find the greatest satisfaction in life when they invest their energies to improve the lives of others. Even when they disagree with them. I was with him until that last part. Invest my life in improving the lives of those with whom I disagree?

Then I worked on today’s gospel lesson and had to rethink that investment thing. The mustard seed may start small, but it grows until many living things can find a home in it. Maybe the small things we try to do for others actually grow beyond our sphere of being and have a positive effect on the lives of so many that we’re bound to contribute to people that don’t think like we do. That’s the kingdom of God.

And yeast. It takes the sugars in flour and creates gasses that lighten the loaf and make it expand. The handful of ground wheat is changed and becomes a loaf of bread that feeds more than it would as flour. (And it tastes better, too.) What if you and I found a way to bring things around us together so that many are blessed? You know we do that with the bakery items that normally would have been discarded. They cost us nothing, and feed many. That’s the kingdom of God.

We could explore the hidden treasure and the net with good and bad fish, but I am hoping that together we can come up with a couple contemporary images that show us something about how God’s kingdom works in west central Iowa in 2020. I’m going to start with this one. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a supermarket. There are necessities and treats and something for everyone. And there are a few things we don’t like—liver and lima beans. Okay, I like lima beans. But not liver.”

What else is there about the supermarket that tells you something about the kingdom of heaven? Remember that a parable is a comparison that lifts up an idea, but doesn’t always tell the whole story. Maybe you think about the various departments in the store and see that many denominations or even faith may be included in God’s kingdom. Or that there’s often more than one kind of specific item so you have choices, like styles of worship. You might even remember when there were samples and recall that the kingdom of heaven is sampled for free, but you do have to invest if you want to enjoy it fully.

The congregations shared examples in this description of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The kingdom of heaven is like a piano, with many individual keys that together make beautiful music.

The kingdom of heaven is like a garden, with a wide variety of colors and shapes of flowers that together make a beautiful bouquet.

The kingdom of heaven is like a beautiful purple flower that also has burrs. There are things that we think are not necessarily good, but they're still there.

Did you notice in the second reading from Romans how Paul encourages the believers there to think about God's kingdom in ways different from those around them? He points out that in all things—like their current situation which included persecution—in all things God is at work for the good of God's own. Paul makes a laundry list at the end of that passage of all the things that people might name that kept them from experiencing the kingdom of God—and in no uncertain terms told them that NOTHING could separate them from God's love.

If you are experiencing challenges or disappointments of things that cause you doubt and fear, please hear this today. The kingdom of God is very near you, in fact, all around you. You are a beloved child of God—and are encouraged to think of a way to describe God's kingdom that embraces your situation today and brings God's love, care and presence to you. And if life is easy and smooth right now, you can focus on the images of the kingdom that inspire gratitude and thanksgiving. They are essential to our faith, too.

Here's one to think about this week: The kingdom of God is like the Dunlap Dairy Sweet/Moorhead Mini-Mart.